

Van Peebles Eyes Music Industry... .. After Film And Theatre ...
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Cover Story: Where Is Sweetback Today?

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Melvin Van Peebles Is Making Records, Man

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Cover Story: Where Is Sweetback Today?

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"Coarse, realistic imagery and dialogue that overwhelm and often offend the senses but a message that makes this the ultimate Black statement on film today. A brilliant personal achievement that precipitated more dialogue and introspection concerning Black films than any other single event in motion picture history." (Black Creation magazine in describing "Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song" among its 10 most important Black films of a decade last year.)

By JAMES P. MURRAY

It looks like any other midtown office building. It's located along Seventh Avenue in the theatre district and characteristically the elevator to the 12th floor is working on its own schedule. But the sign on the door of Yeah, Inc., one multi-media production company immediately draws your attention. It's upside down.

Inside the two and a half room suite one morning earlier this week, it was business as usual: a secretary sat at her desk, busy at work as did a company associate. Melvin Van Peebles, the boss, was reclining on a couch talking serious business.

Minutes later, the host advises his staff, "I ain in for nobody" and escorts his guest into another room. He removes an album from its unmarked jacket and places it on a turntable. The volume is adjusted. Then, as the record plays, he leaves without further explanation.

Unknown Four Years Ago

Just about four years ago, Melvin Van Peebles had been an unknown Hollywood director, even though he was Black. He had won the San Francisco Film Festival Award in 1967 with his French-produced entry, "The Story" of a Three Day Pass. Then, as a director on contract to Columbia Pictures, he took the helm of a satire on Black-white relations called "Watermelon Man" which starred Godfrey Cambridge as an obnoxious white businessman who turns Black overnight.

At that point, the Van Peebles game

plan became apparent. With money had made from "Watermelon Man," he formed a one-man production company and wrote, produced, directed, scored and starred in "Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song."

But making the picture and later getting it to the public was no easy feat. Although he had been offered a three-picture contract at Columbia, most people in the industry could barely read the first page of the "Sweetback" screenplay, which was inspired while out on a south-

west desert. Ultimately, low funds from a personally subsidized budget made it necessary to shoot the film in 20 days (two less than "Watermelon Man") with a 19 man non-union crew. At one point, when things got so bad for the independent filmmaker that he was down to his last \$13, Bill Cosby offered a loan of \$50,000.

Seven months later, after the film was scored and edited, no distributor would touch that story of the radicalization and subsequent revolt of a stud. Finally, Van Peebles, who owns distribution rights to

"Sweetback," worked out a seven-year lease with the New York-based Cinemation Industries, until then known for marketing films on the sexploitation circuit.

Then, even with a distributor, only two theaters in the country would book it. One of them was the Detroit Grand Circus, which had been averaging around \$4,000 a week playing third and fourth run products.

Sweetback in Detroit

"Sweetback" opened March 30 at the Grand Circus and grossed over \$200,000 in its first four weeks. The Coronet in Atlanta had also agreed to play the film and it also smashed all existing house attendance records there as it had in Detroit.

Van Peebles brought his play, to Harlem later that spring with a midnight preview at the Loews Victoria on 125th Street. He had just returned from Boston where a court-victory had forced a theater-owner to replace nine minutes edited out of the X-rated film. Van Peebles also challenged the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) with a suit after it failed to give "Sweetback" a "Non-rating." Most advertisements for the film read, "Rated X by an all-white jury."

The rating seemed to have little effect on the predominantly Black audiences, which responded so strongly that Sweetback became the top moneymaking film for three straight weeks that spring and two more in the fall. It has grossed in excess of \$11 million and even two years ago, many in the industry were predicting that it would become the most independently produced movie in recent times. A Bantam paperback and Stax soundtrack album also sold well.

The Panther Review

Van Peebles considered his movie revolutionary, and the Black Panther newspaper devoted virtually 12 pages to a sweeping, detailed analysis of the film. Defense Minister Huey Newtoun's scene by scene review, an effort that included no



SWEETBACK ON THE RUN

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... After Film And Theatre Success

less than four Biblical quotes, was a fascinating call for Black community support.

Some people in Van Peebles' hometown of Chicago did not agree, however. Mrs. Val Gray Ward called "Sweetback" "noting more than a hustle of Black people's money, their fears, their seaknesses, desires to see themselves in movies and the sexual hangups of a relatively few Blacks." And later, Ebony's Lerone Bennett was to undertake an unprecedented column to condemn the film.

While reaction to the film — both positive and negative — was spontaneous, prolonged and energetic, Van Peebles had sat in the Cinemation offices in May, 1971 and tossed out a rather unexpected announcement about his future. He was going to produce a Broadway play in the fall.

The move could not have been more surprising. For Van Peebles had racked up a string of unprecedented victories (for a Black man) in the big leagues of moviemaking. With all of his notoriety was an avant-garde, if defiantly unorthodox filmmaker, his retreat to the limited restrictions of theatre seemed curious. While the move was perhaps in character (Broadway was another challenge to conquer), it was certainly counter to the prevailing and even historic trend of Black artists to move in the opposite direction. They had always graduated from legitimate stage to movies.

Sustains His Play

In contrast to Van Peebles' film success, the theatrical move became even more questionable when his innovative and scintillating play, "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death" ran into immediate and sustained red ink. Only with a great deal of his personal funds again — this time from "Sweetback" — did he hold his new venture together. He was somewhat rewarded, however, when the play closed as the fifth longest-running show on Broadway.

During the run, Van Peebles extended his arms to the Black community and brought literally thousands of Blacks folks to Broadway for the first time. Their response to this new experience was overwhelmingly positive and coupled with the critical response, a proclamation from Mayor Lindsay, and even Tony nominations from the establishment, it all made the play a historic event for the Black cast and crew.

By the time the play closed in preparation for touring, a second Van



FOR THE CAUSE

Peebles comedy musical, "Don't Play Us Cheap" was running concurrently on Broadway.

Then, an item appeared in a well-read theatrical column. "Cheap" had closed after a relatively brief run and the columnist was claiming that the director had taken a \$100,000 loss on the project. Perhaps that was paying the price of true independence. Still, with exciting and controversial precedents set in Hollywood and on Broadway, one wondered which direction Melvin Van Peebles' career would take next.

After he had played, "There," his favorite cut on the future album, Van Peebles sat and stared straight out a window into the heart of New York City.

A Recording Artist

"I just okayed the master," he said, explaining that the final step in preparation had been completed. "I just waited out my time at A&M and then went to the best."

Van Peebles had recorded with the Los Angeles-based company of Herb Alpert (of

the "Tijuana Brass") but found that his first lp, "Brer Soul" had sold predominantly to an open-minded white audience since the company did not know how to promote to Blacks. Instead of renewing his contract, Van Peebles signed with Atlantic Records, (the best) an empire well established in handling Black acts.

Van Peebles explained that his first Atlantic album, entitled, "What the f... you mean, I can't sing?" will be released late next month.

"This is the year of music," he said of his career change.

Van Peebles said that he wrote, produced and sang on the new album and that early reaction from the trade publications had been strong.

"It's the same as Sweetback," he said. "When nobody else does it, you do it yourself. I'm heavy into self help or at least self-reliance."

Describing the approach to the album as relevant, Van Peebles added, "I've written about 50 songs. But outside of the

cast album, no one has ever recorded any of them. I did my first songs hoping and expecting that they would be picked up by other groups or artists. They say they are looking for relevant material, but they have yet to respond."

His Music Style

The Van Peebles style as revealed in his two Broadway plays and albums is one that is often funky, if not consistently commercial. The writing is topical, poetic and very often satirically most effective at capturing the moods and dialect of the ghetto.

Van Peebles still feels that "his power base is in writing" and in that regard, he has completed a novel called "The True Americans", which will be released later this year. And he points out with some pride that his journal on "Sweetback" is now in the fourth edition.

And there is even a performer side to Van Peebles, who toured several cities last year with his one-man show, "Out There By My Lonesome."

On a television show three years ago, Van Peebles promised that there would be a sequel to "Sweetback" and he confirmed his intention to fulfill that promise. At the current time, the original, which he describes as "still the baddest thing out there" is being rereleased across the country. And a film version of "Don't Play Us Cheap," which was previewed in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. last year will soon open in New York.

Won't Critize Others

He will not specifically comment on other films and in discussing the movie industry today, he points out, "I'm often encouraged to badmouth some of the Black people in the industry. But we must remember that I worked for the man for 10 years. I don't intend to intimidate others."

Van Peebles said that he feels that others are learning from the experience of working for Hollywood and will soon be able to assert their own sovereignty.

Van Peebles proudly and fiercely defends his independence and success. He feels that when people pay their full dues and still can't get full membership, they ought to investigate some obvious alternatives to attain artistic freedom. He seems relatively unmoved by the money he's made or the money he's lost in his career.

"I've invested my bread in Black people," he said. "I won't be blackmailed by failures and I won't be blackmailed by my success. I'll do what I feel like doing when I feel like doing it."

